

Oban's avian symbol of

THE MALLARD is the commonest and best known of ducks, as well as being the ancestor of almost all the domestic breeds of duck in the world.

Mallards were first domesticated in China or south-east Asia over 2,000 years ago.

Today, in Britain, there are about 20 breeds of domestic duck, which range from white, through multicoloured and brown, to almost black.

There exists huge plumage variations in the 'wild' population, caused through interbreeding with farmyard escapes, producing an extensive range in size and colour

among this most familiar species of wildfowl. Among the gathering of up to 200 birds, which assemble on the George Street foreshore in Oban, it can sometimes be difficult to spot a typically wild bird, such as has been the potential for mixed breeding locally.

The unmistakable drake Mallard is a truly handsome bird, with a shiny, bottle-green head, narrow white ring round it's neck and a brown neck with a purplish sheen. It's grey

underparts colouring is actually made up of thin grey lines on a white background, known as vermiculation. Drakes also have characteristic black, curly tail feathers, which are absent in the mottled and cryptically-plumaged brown ducks.

With truly wild birds readily interbreeding with domestic stock, many strange drakes, of peculiar plumages, sometimes occur, and several such birds can often be seen where Mallards congregate in the Oban area.

After their role in the breeding season is over (June), drake Mallards begin to moult their exhausted flight feathers. This is done simultaneously, leaving the drakes flightless for about a month, during which time they can be vulnerable to predators, such as foxes. To provide some protection for the males, the moult starts with their bright body plumage. This is replaced by dowdy brown feathers, making them look like females. This phenomenon is known as the 'eclipse'.

This eclipse plumage is why in mid-summer it seems that all the drakes have mysteriously vanished. Once the flight feathers have re-grown, the birds moult their body



feathers again, soon regaining the beautiful iridescent green, blue and purple feathers that make them so easily recognisable. However, even during eclipse, drakes can still be separated from ducks by way of the colour of their beaks. Unlike the duck's orange-black bills, drakes always retain a horn-yellow colour to their beaks, allowing both sexes to be differentiated, even when their plumage appears similar.

Why not try to pick out the 'boys' from the 'girls' when feeding the ducks at Oban's Black Lynn burn ?

Mallards settle to breed on local ponds, burns and marshes in early Spring, with the first broods of ducklings often appearing in April. Copulation between the duck

and drake has been recorded on the George Street foreshore as early as January and as late as November.

Small pre-breeding parties of Mallards are welcome visitors to many local gardens in early Spring. There tends, however, to be an imbalance of the sexes in most flocks of Mallard, with males outnumbering females, thus creating potential problems for ducks from the unwanted advances of unattached drakes.

The sexual behaviour of drake Mallards can be very aggressive. Indeed, Mallards were a symbol of male promiscuity and fertility in the 13th century, prompting Pope Gregory IX to preach a crusade against a devil-worshipping cult whose symbol was a drake.

Local birdwatcher, Stuart Gibson, commented: 'Once the female has laid her clutch of eggs (up to 13), the pair's bond breaks and the male leaves to join small flocks of other drakes.'

The Mallard is the best-studied of the duck tribe, and it is the easiest to enjoy watching. Around 130,000 pairs nest annually in Britain, with this number being increased four-fold with the arrival of Icelandic and Scandinavian immigrants in winter.

Mallards are dabbling ducks that get most of their food from close to the water's surface, although they often up-end to reach morsels a little deeper down. They are omnivorous and opportunistic, eating a range of plant materials